Cardinal Czerny talks Church priorities and ‘walking together’ during Oceania visit

by **MARK BOWLING** — 8 February 2023 Reading Time: 6 mins read AA

Global concerns: Influential Church leader Cardinal Michael Czerny in Fiji. Photo: Neil Helmore

ONE of the Church’s most influential leaders, Cardinal Michael Czerny sees a big shift in the way the Roman Curia under Pope Francis responds to global concerns, including human rights, climate change and migration.

“There is no geopolitical centre of the Church,” Cardinal Czerny, prefect of the Vatican’s Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development told The Catholic Leader.

“The priority issues are set by what’s happening in the Church, by what’s happening in the different regions.

“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of God’s people, wherever they are, these are the priorities.”

This week Cardinal Czerny visited Fiji – his first trip to the Pacific region as a Cardinal – where he attended the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania assembly.

The 76-year-old Canadian Jesuit, pretty much at home in every corner of the globe, is now recognised as one of the key influencers in the Vatican, a righthand man of Pope Francis and even considered by some as *papabilis*, meaning a possible candidate to be elected pope.

Cardinal Michael Czerny: Considered by some as a possible candidate to be elected pope. Photo: Mark Bowling

He speaks at least five languages fluently or close to it, and has served in North and Latin America, in Rome and in Africa, before coming to the Vatican in 2010.

In 2019 Francis announced that then-Father Michael Czerny would become a cardinal, ordaining him a bishop just one day before making him a cardinal on October 5.

In 2022 he was sent by Pope Francis as one of two special envoys to Ukraine, along with Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, to manifest the Holy Father's closeness to families suffering from the war, to mothers and children fleeing the country, and to Christian communities welcoming them in neighbouring countries.

"What was very gratifying is that, throughout the visit, no introduction was ever needed. People knew right away why I was there, and very much appreciated the Holy Father's gesture," he said.

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In Suva to attend the Oceania assembly this week, Cardinal Czerny has joined with Church leaders from Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea/Solomon Islands and the Pacific Islands to reflect on and pray about their shared mission in the region.

The assembly is exploring the theme "Save the Ocean to Save Mother Earth" and also serving as part of the Continental phase of the Synod on Synodality.

Cardinal Czerny opened the assembly, celebrated the opening Mass for the gathering, and later on the first day delivered the opening address.

"Climate change falls under 'care for our common home,' which here [in Oceania] also means care for the ocean," the 76-year-old said during the opening address.

Pacific visit: Cardinal Czerny celebrating the opening Mass during the Oceania assembly in Suva.

Fijian experience: The opening Mass in Suva.

He acknowledged that the ocean is the "cradle of life," therefore humans need to respect creation.

At the same time Cardinal Czerny identified many of the region's current concerns: unsustainable exploitation of ocean resources, human trafficking, migration, and geo-political rivalries.

The bishops have been told by local churches that rising sea levels threaten to force entire small island populations to abandon their homes, destroying not only their land but their identity and culture.

"What's important for them is to know that the Church as a whole, and the Holy Father and their own bishops and others in the Church hear their cry and are accompanying them," Cardinal Czerny said.

Through his own family history, Cardinal Czerny has learned much about the impacts of war and migration, and the importance of accompaniment.

Born in 1946 in post-war Czechoslovakia, his family fled two years later, settling in Montreal, Canada, with the support of a sponsor family.

"This family helped us to enter the country, welcomed us, and guided my parents through the first steps of getting around a new city while coping with a new language, grasping the habits and attitudes of a different culture, and finding work. After the settling-in period, there eventually comes a time of crossing ethnic barriers and making friends," Cardinal Czerny recalled.

He wears a pectoral cross that is a constant reminder of the plight of today's migrants and refugees.

It is fashioned from wood taken from the remains of a boat used by migrants to cross the Mediterranean from North Africa in their attempt to reach the Italian island of Lampedusa.

Migrant message: Cardinal Czerny's pectoral cross. Photo: Mark Bowling

"The material suggests the wood of the cross on which Jesus the Son of God was crucified 'to take away the sins of the world'," Cardinal Czerny recently told Vatican News.

"The original nail clearly reminds us that Jesus was nailed to the Cross; the Jesuit coat of arms includes the traditional three nails.

"The poor wood suggests the Jesuit vow of poverty and the desire for a humble, engaged Church.

"The cracks in the red paint and the wood are reminders of the wounds, the suffering, the blood spilled in the Crucifixion and when the world forgets compassion and justice, while the lighter colour in the upper portion suggests the Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, and the fullness of life which He came to bring."

Cardinal Czerny said he holds great hope for the Synod on Synodality. The three-year process (2021-24), which was discussed at the Fiji assembly, is now in its Continental phase in preparation for the Universal synod meeting in Rome in October this year.

He described synod as "essential for the life of the Church" and something that has been "lost or obscured over time".

"And thanks be to God that Pope St Paul VI brought it back and, after 50 years of trial and error, Pope Francis has made it a key and essential part of the new post-Vatican II renewal of the Church," Cardinal Czerny said.

"To 'synod' is to learn to walk together. When we do so, we are faithful to the Lord and faithful to our tradition; and at the same time, sensitive and open to the current and urgent needs of God's people. No one is excluded from this journey, this walking together. So we are especially attentive to including those who are suffering and are marginalised or exploited or disadvantaged."

The idea of 'together' is also pertinent to integral human development, the focus of the Dicastery that Cardinal Czerny heads.

"Integral human development means that we bring together the different dimensions of life in light of our faith, so that we don't have a pious or holy part of our life and then other, completely separate parts of life – that we have a whole life which is Christian," he said.

"And deep down, this is what humans really want, but it isn't easy.

"I am happy that our Church is helping, both to have the diversity of humanity 'synoding', walking together, and to enable everyone to embrace the different dimensions of human life."